

CHAPTER LXXX.

Return of the Jews from Babylon. (536 B. C.)

Thou who art a forgiving God, long-suffering and full of compassion didst not forsake them.—*II. Esd. 9, 17.*

THE prophet Jeremias had foretold that the captivity of Babylon would not last longer than seventy years, and that the Jews should then return to their own country. Daniel had renewed this consoling promise, and had added another prophecy of greater importance; namely, that from the day on which the order should be given to rebuild Jerusalem till the death of the Messias, there would remain only seventy weeks of years; that is, four hundred and ninety years. So that the Jews knew not only the family from which the Savior would spring, but also the city where He would be born, and the year in which He would die.

2. The severe sufferings of the captivity of Babylon, together with the exhortations of the prophets, particularly those of Daniel and Ezechiel, had brought the Jewish people to a sense of their duty. Wherefore, it happened that in the seventieth year of their sad captivity, Cyrus, king of Persia, by a divine inspiration, issued an edict that all the Jews who were in his kingdom should go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of the Lord.

3. He also restored to them the sacred vessels which Nabuchodonosor had carried away. Thereupon, more than forty thousand Israelites, under the leadership of Prince Zorobabel, and of the high priest Josue, returned to Judea, the name thenceforward given to the ancient kingdom of Judea, together with the remnants of the other ten tribes which had joined themselves to Juda and Benjamin before the downfall of Israel. They immediately built an altar, and offered sacrifice every morning and evening.

4. One year after the return from captivity, the founda-

tions of the new temple were laid in Jerusalem. The priests and the Levites were there with their trumpets and cymbals, as of old, singing to the Lord canticles of praise and thanksgiving, while the people all rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when, after many years, the temple was completed, it was consecrated and dedicated with great solemnity.

5. Many of the old people who remembered the former temple wept to see that the new one did not equal the old in magnificence. But the prophet Aggeus consoled them with the assurance that the second temple should be more glorious than the first, because the Messias, the Desired of all nations, would be seen in it, and would honor it with his presence. The same prediction was made by the prophet Zachary.

6. About eighty years after their return from captivity, the Jews, by command of the king of Persia, commenced to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The Samaritans opposed them and tried even by violence to prevent the people from rebuilding their city. But the Jews prayed to God to assist them, and in order to prevent surprise from the Samaritans, divided themselves into two great bodies.

7. Those who were most brave and courageous they placed on the outposts of the city, well armed, in order to keep off the enemy, while those who were skilled in masonry and other mechanical arts, carried on the work. At the end of fifty-two days all the walls and ramparts were completed. The Samaritans, seeing that the hand of God was there, ceased to trouble their neighbors.

8. The Jews, understanding that they had been successful in rebuilding the temple and the walls of Jerusalem in spite of so many obstacles, returned sincere thanks to God. And Esdras, the high-priest, having publicly read the law of the Lord, they all promised with tears, to be faithful to it. For they had received a new and strong proof that God had forgiven their own sins, and the ingratitude of their fathers.

QUESTIONS.

1. What had the prophet Jeremias foretold? Who had renewed this promise? Adding what? 2. What had brought the Jewish people to a sense of their duty? What edict did Cyrus, king of Persia, issue, by divine inspiration? 3. What did he also restore to the Jews? Under whose leadership did the Jews return from captivity? What remnants had long before joined themselves to the tribes of Juda and Benjamin? How long was it after the return from captivity that the foundations of the new temple were laid in Jerusalem? 5. What did many of the old people do who remembered the former temple? Who consoled them? With what assurance? By what other prophet was the same prediction made? 6. How long was it after their return from captivity that the Jews commenced to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem? By whose command did they commence? Who opposed them? But what did the Jews do? 7. What did the Samaritans do, seeing that the hand of God was there? 8. What did the Jews do when the work was finished? Who read the law publicly? What did the Jews promise to do?

CHAPTER LXXXI.

Esther.

Pride goeth before destruction; and the spirit is lifted up before a fall.—*Prov. 16, 18.*

AS the government of the kings of Persia was exceedingly mild, many of the Jews remained in the kingdom of Babylon. God permitted this for the spiritual good of the Gentiles, so that the latter, being brought into daily contact with the Jews, might more easily arrive at the knowledge of the true God, and be instructed in the promises made concerning a Savior to come.

2. It happened, by a special dispensation of God, that many of the Jews, like Daniel and his companions in former years, were in high favor with the kings of Persia, and made use of their influence to protect their countrymen and to propagate the true faith. At a certain time it pleased Divine Providence to employ in this way a pious Jewess, named Esther.

3. She lived in the reign of Assuerus, in the house of Mar-

dochai, her uncle, who had brought her up from her infancy. Assuerus having seen her was pleased with her beauty and virtue, placed the crown upon her head, and made her his queen. But she, by Mardochai's advice, left the king in ignorance regarding her nation. And Mardochai, who loved Esther as his own child, came every day and sat at the gate of the palace.

4. Now it came to pass that two of the officials of the palace had conspired together to kill the king. Mardochai, having discovered the plot, revealed it to Esther, who immediately told the king. The affair being examined, Mardochai's statement was found to be true. The two conspirators¹ were hanged, and the facts were recorded in the annals of the kingdom.

5. Some time after, Assuerus raised a certain Aman to the highest dignity in the empire. All the king's servants bent the knee before Aman and worshiped him. Mardochai alone did not bend the knee before Aman, as he would not give to man the honor due to God alone. Aman perceiving this, and learning that Mardochai was a Jew, became very angry.

6. To be revenged on Mardochai he told Assuerus that the Jews were planning a revolt, and prevailed upon the king to publish an edict commanding all the Jews in his empire to be put to death, and their property to be taken away. The Jews were terrified, and began to weep and lament. But Mardochai told Esther of the edict, so that she might intercede with the king for her own people.

7. Then Esther said: "All the provinces know, that whosoever cometh into the king's inner court, who is not called for, is immediately put to death. How then can I go in to the king, not being called." To these words Mardochai replied: "Who knoweth whether thou art not therefore come

¹ CONSPIRATORS, persons who plot against any one.

to the kingdom that thou mightest be ready for such a time as this?" Esther, therefore, praying fervently, and abstaining from food and drink for three days, resolved to go in to the king, not being called, against the law, and to expose herself to death and to danger.

8. On the third day she put on her glorious apparel and wore her glittering robes, and passed through the door with a smiling countenance which hid a mind full of anguish and exceeding great fear. But when the king had lifted up his face, and with burning eyes had shown the wrath of his heart, Esther sank down and rested her head upon her handmaid. Then the king was seized with pity. He leaped from his throne, and upheld her in his arms, and said: "What is the matter, Esther? I am thy brother, fear not! Thou shalt not die, for this law is not made for thee, but for all others. What wilt thou, Queen Esther?" She, recovering herself, answered: "If it please the king, I beseech thee to come to me this day, and Aman with thee, to the banquet which I have prepared."

9. The king acceded to her wish; and, during the repast, he desired to know her request. She answered: "If it please the king to give me what I ask, and to fulfill my petition, let the king and Aman come again to the banquet which I have prepared them, and to-morrow I will open my mind to the king." The king promised to do so, and Aman left the palace with a joyful heart. But in going out he saw Mardo-chai sitting at the door of the palace.

10. And because Mardo-chai would not bow down before him like the others, he was filled with rage; and going home to his house, ordered a gallows fifty cubits high to be erected to hang Mardo-chai on the following morning. Now it so happened that the king could not sleep that night, and to divert his mind, he ordered the annals of his reign to be read to him.

11. When the reader came to the place which related how Mardo-chai had discovered the plot against the king's life,

Assuerus suddenly asked what reward Mardochai had received for this important service. He was told that the man had never received any reward. Then the king called for Aman, whom he asked what ought to be done to honor the man whom the king desired to honor.

12. Aman, supposing that there was question of himself, said that the man whom the king desired to honor, ought to be clothed with the king's apparel, and be set upon the king's horse, and have the royal crown put upon his head, and that the first of the king's princes and nobles should hold his horse, and going through the streets of the city they should proclaim before him: "Thus shall he be honored whom the king hath a mind to honor!"

13. Then the king said to him: "Make haste and take the robe and the horse, and do as thou hast spoken to Mardochai, the Jew, who sitteth before the gate of the palace." Aman was surprised and enraged to hear these words, but he dared not disobey the word of the king. He went, therefore, and did as he was ordered. Meanwhile the hour came for the queen's banquet, and Aman went thither in all haste.

14. While they sat at the table the king said again to the queen: "What is thy petition, Esther, that it may be granted thee? Although thou ask the half of my kingdom, thou shalt have it." Esther replied: "If I have found favor in thy sight, O king, give me my life, for which I ask, and my people, for which I request. For we are given up, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish."

15. The king, in surprise, asked: "Who is this and of what power that he should dare to do these things?" Esther answered: "It is Aman that is our most wicked enemy." But Aman, hearing what the Queen said, was seized with terror. The king arose from the table in great wrath. Being told by one of the attendants that Aman had prepared a gibbet fifty cubits high whereon to hang Mardochai, he ordered Aman himself to be hanged upon it.

16. The same day King Assuerus raised Mardochai to the

high dignity which Aman had held, and the edict against the Jews was immediately revoked. The Jews rejoiced beyond measure at their unexpected deliverance, and many of the Gentiles, seeing how wonderfully God protected them, embraced their religion. Queen Esther is a striking figure of Mary, the immaculate Queen of Heaven. For as Esther alone was exempted from the law of death, so Mary alone was preserved from original sin, in which the rest of mankind are born into this world. Again, Esther saved her people from slaughter, and Mary by her intercession, saves all her faithful clients from the flames of hell.

QUESTIONS.

1. Why did many of the Jews remain in Babylon? Why did God permit this? 2. What happened by a special dispensation of God? Who was, at a certain time, employed in this way by Divine Providence? 3. In what reign did Esther live? Who was her uncle? What did the king do when he had seen Esther and was charmed with her beauty? What did she do by Mardochai's advice? What did Mardochai do every day? 4. What had two officials of the palace conspired to do? Who discovered the plot? To whom did he reveal it? What did Esther do? 5. Whom did Assuerus, some time after, raise to the highest dignity in the empire? What did all the king's servants do to Aman? Who alone did not bend the knee to Aman? Why so? How did Aman feel, hearing that Mardochai was a Jew? 6. What did Aman tell Assuerus in order to be revenged on Mardochai? What did he prevail upon the king to do? How did the Jews feel? But what did Mardochai do? 7. What did Esther say about the law not to appear before the king without being invited? What did Mardochai answer? But what did Esther resolve to do? 8. What did she do on the third day? How did the king look when he saw Esther approach unbidden? What did the king do, being seized with pity? What did he say? What did Esther answer? 9. What did the king, next day, during the repast, desire to know? What did Esther answer? Whom did Aman see, as he went out with a joyful heart? 10. Why was Aman filled with rage? What did he order? What happened that night? What did he order to be read to him? 11. What did the king ask when the reader came to the place which related how Mardochai had discovered the plot against the king's life? What was he told? For whom did the king call? What did he ask when Aman came? 12. What did Aman say, supposing that there was question of himself? 13. What did the king then say to him? Did Aman obey this order? 14. While they sat at table, what did the king say again to the queen? What did Esther reply? 15. What did the king ask, in surprise? What did Esther tell

him? What did the king do? What was he told by one of the attendants? What did he order? 16. What did King Assuerus do the same day? How did the Jews feel? What effect had all this on the Gentiles? Of whom is Queen Esther a striking figure?

CHAPTER LXXXII.

Translation of the Old Testament into Greek. (285 B.C.)

Wise Sayings of Jesus, the Son of Sirach.

The Lord giveth wisdom; and out of His mouth cometh prudence and knowledge.—*Prov. 2, 6.*

THE Jews, who had returned to their country, lived in peace for two hundred years under the dominion of the successors of Cyrus. This peace was not disturbed even when Alexander the Great, king of Macedon, destroyed the Persian Empire. Whilst Alexander lived, he treated the Jews with great kindness; but when, at his death, the Macedonian empire was divided, evil times came upon Judea.

2. That province became the object of dispute between the kings of Syria and those of Egypt, who made it the battleground for their contending armies, so that it was turned almost into a desert. As a natural consequence of these protracted wars, ignorance, corruption and vice struck daily deeper root among the Jewish people. This was one of the darkest periods of their history.

3. It was about this time that the king of Egypt wished to have a Greek translation of the sacred books of the Jews. He therefore, expressed his desire to the High Priest at Jerusalem, who granted the request and sent to Alexandria, the capital of Egypt, seventy-two wise men who were versed both in Greek and Hebrew. These men were well received by the king, and they made for him a correct translation. At that time the educated among the heathen nations knew

and spoke the Greek language. So this translation of the scriptures began to be read by the pagans, who thereby came to the knowledge of the true God and to the belief in the Messias. In all this we see the hand of divine providence, who wished to prepare the Gentiles for the coming of the Savior.

4. Almighty God also inspired a pious Jew, Jesus the son of Sirach, to write a book of religious and moral instruction. It is one of the books of the Catholic Bible, and is called Ecclesiasticus. Here are a few of the beautiful maxims contained in it: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning and a crown of wisdom. The word of God is the fountain of wisdom, and her ways are everlasting commandments. The fear of the Lord shall delight the heart, and shall give joy, and gladness, and length of days. It shall go well with him that feareth the Lord, and in the days of his end he shall be blessed. My son, from thy youth up receive instruction, and even to thy gray hairs thou shalt find wisdom.

5. "Come to her as one that plougheth and soweth, and wait for her good fruits. For in working about her thou shalt labor a little, and shalt quickly eat of her fruits. Take all that shall be brought upon thee, and keep patience, for gold and silver are tried in the fire, but acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation. Hear the judgment of your father, and grieve him not in his life. The father's blessing establisheth the houses of the children, but the mother's curse rooteth up the foundation.

6. "Despise not a man in his old age, for we also shall become old. Despise not the discourse of them that are ancient and wise; but acquaint thyself with their proverbs. Praise not a man for his beauty, neither despise a man for his look. The bee is small among flying things, but her fruit hath the chiefest sweetness. Be in peace with many, but let one of a thousand be thy counselor.

7. "Nothing can be compared to a faithful friend, and no

weight of gold and silver is able to countervail the goodness of his fidelity. If thou wouldst get a friend, try him before thou takest him, and do not credit him easily. For there is a friend for his own occasion, and he will not abide in the day of thy trouble. A lie is a foul blot in a man. In nowise speak against the truth, but be ashamed of the lie in thy ignorance.

8. "Let not the naming of God be usual in thy mouth, and meddle not with the names of saints. A man that sweareth much shall be filled with iniquity, and a scourge shall not depart from his house. Before thou hear, answer not a word, and interrupt not others in the midst of their discourse. Hast thou heard a word against thy neighbor, let it die within thee, trusting that it will not burst thee. Hedge in thy ears with thorns; hear not a wicked tongue; and make doors and bars to thy mouth.

9. "Melt down thy gold and silver, and make a balance for thy words. Flee from sin as from the face of a serpent. All iniquity is like a two-edged sword; there is no remedy from the wound thereof. Observe the time, and fly from evil. He that loveth danger shall perish therein, and he that toucheth pitch shall be defiled with it. In every work of thine regard thy soul in faith, for this is the keeping of the commandments. In all thy works remember thy last end, and thou shalt never sin."

QUESTIONS.

1. Under whom did the Jews, having returned from Babylon, live in peace for two hundred years? Was this peace disturbed when Alexander the Great destroyed the Persian empire? How did Alexander, while he lived, treat the Jews? But what came for the Jews at his death? 2. Between what kings did the province of Judea become the object of dispute? What was the natural consequence of these protracted wars? 3. What did the king of Egypt wish to have about this time? Whom did the High Priest send to him? How were the seventy-two wise men received by the king? What language did the educated heathens speak at this time? What was the good done by this translation? Was the hand of God in all this? 4. What did Almighty God inspire Jesus the son of Sirach to do? Which of the books of the Catholic Bible is this? What

is the fear of the Lord? What is the word of God? 5. What does the father's blessing establish? 6. Whom are we not to despise? What are we not to despise? 7. What is here said of a faithful friend? What is a lie? 8. What is not to be usual in our mouth? With what are we not to meddle? What is said of a man that swears much? 9. From what are we here told to flee as from the face of a serpent? What are we to remember in all our works?

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

The Martyrdom of Eleazar. (168 B. C.)

Many are the afflictions of the just.—Ps. 33, 20.

THE most terrible trial which the Jews had to undergo was that which came upon them at the time when they were made subject to the proud and cruel Antiochus, king of Syria. That king ordered the Holy Books to be torn and burned; he profaned the temple, and forbade the observance of the divine laws, under the penalty of death.

2. Unhappily, many of the Jews, yielding to a guilty fear, obeyed the king's order; but many more refused to comply with the impious mandate, and chose to die rather than violate the holy precept of God. Among these was an old man named Eleazar, ninety years of age, who was renowned as a doctor of the law.

3. When Eleazar refused to eat swine's flesh, the use of which was forbidden by the law of Moses, they opened his mouth by force in order to compel him to eat. But he still refused, and declared he would undergo any torment that might be inflicted upon him rather than stain his soul with sin by a violation of the commandment of God. But some of those who stood by, pitying the good old man, advised him to eat of some other meat which was not forbidden, so as to feign compliance with the king's command.

4. Eleazar replied: "It does not become our age to dissemble." He then explained to these false friends that even

if he made a mere show of complying with the king's orders in this matter, the young men of his nation might be tempted to follow his example, saying: The aged Eleazar has become a pagan, why may not we do the same? Moreover, he exclaimed: "Though for the present time, I should be delivered from the punishment of men; yet should I not escape the hand of the Almighty, neither alive nor dead."

5. Having thus spoken, the holy old man was dragged to the place of execution, where he suffered a glorious death. In the midst of his torments he cried out: "Lord, Thou knowest I suffer grievous pains, but I am well content to suffer these things, because I fear Thee." Eleazar, by his steadfast adherence to the law of God, and the fortitude wherewith he suffered a most cruel martyrdom has left a fine example of fidelity and heroic virtue.

QUESTIONS.

1. What was the most terrible trial which the Jews had to undergo? What did Antiochus order? 2. Did many of the Jews obey the king's order? What did many more choose, rather than comply with the impious mandate? Who was among these? 3. What was done to Eleazar when he refused to eat swine's flesh? What did he declare, still refusing? What did some of those who stood by, advise Eleazar to do? 4. What did Eleazar reply? What did he then explain to these false friends? What did he, moreover, exclaim? 5. What happened when the holy old man had thus spoken? In the midst of his torments, what did he cry out? What has Eleazar left by his steadfast adherence to the law of God?